

Statement of Jeffrey D. Feltman Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for Near East
Affairs At the Meeting of the United States
Commission on International Religious Freedom

"Advancing Religious Freedom in Iran";

February 21, 2008

It is an honor to be here today to meet with the Commissioners.

Next to the challenge of success in Iraq, there's probably no other issue that's so important to American foreign policy and to our future than dealing successfully with the challenge posed by Iran.

Iran poses many challenges to us: First, Iran's quest for a nuclear weapons capability undermines global security. Second, Iran is the leading state sponsor of terrorism and its disruptive influence of Iran in the region attempts to undermine democratically-elected governments in Lebanon, Israel, Palestine and Iraq. Last, Iran's human rights abuses and repression of its own people challenge international and American values.

The challenge posed by Iran goes right to the heart of our most vital interests in the Middle East, and human rights and religious freedom are an important part of how we approach the challenge of Iran.

Religious freedom is also rooted in our principles and history as a nation. Though religious freedom is also part of our larger strategy of human rights and democracy promotion, at its core, religious freedom is about individuals and their right to believe what they choose to believe or not believe.

International Religious Freedom Report

Since the passage of the International Religious Freedom Act in 1998, we have made important strides in integrating religious freedom into our diplomatic strategy. Last September, Secretary Rice submitted to Congress the Department's Annual Report on International Religious Freedom, which demonstrates the importance we attach to religious freedom. A number of countries not only fall far short of international standards, but demonstrate little improvement, and a result are designated a "Country of Particular Concern" or CPC. A CPC designation provides the U.S. with a range of options - including sanctions - to moderate violators of international religious freedom. Iran is one such country and every year since 1998, the Secretary has designated Iran as a CPC for its flagrant disregard of international religious freedom norms and egregious treatment of particularly non-Shi'a religious groups but also its treatment of some Shi'a as well.

Characterizing Religious Freedom in Iran

Let me first begin by putting Iran's mistreatment of religious groups in the context of the internal situation in Iran today, and its continuing poor human rights record, generally. Since President Ahmadi-Nejad assumed the Presidency in 2005, the human rights situation as a whole has markedly declined, particularly over the past year. In January, the Ministry of Islamic Culture and Guidance suspended the license of Zanan, a women's journal that focused on social issues.

The regime also appears to be signaling that the red line has shifted, making it difficult for Iranians to converse freely with each other on social issues. In addition to Zanan, some 41 newspapers and 25 other publications have been suspended under President Ahmadi-Nejad. Political repression has continued as labor leaders such as Mansour Osanloo [MAHN-soor OH-sahn-loo] have been arrested and activists rounded up, in some cases, for simply demanding their wages. Women's rights activists have been subject to beatings and received strict prison sentences for organizing and participating in peaceful protests or for collecting signatures for the One Million Signatures Campaign, an effort to reform Iran's laws to provide equality for women. Students who might disagree with the current Administration in Iran have also been tossed into jail. It has become increasingly clear over the last three years that this current regime will not tolerate dissent or independent thinking.

Nearly all religious as well as ethnic minorities in Iran face some degree of social, economic, or cultural discrimination in Iran. If you do not subscribe to the regime's interpretation of Islam you are prevented from serving in the judiciary, security services, and other leadership positions. Applicants for public sector employment are screened for their knowledge of, and adherence to Islam. Government workers who do not observe Islam's principles and rules are also subject to penalties.

Iranian law forbids non-Muslims from holding positions of authority over Muslims in the armed forces and non-Muslims are barred from becoming military officers. By law, religious minorities are not allowed to be elected to a representative body, unless its for one of the five seats in parliament that are reserved for recognized religious minorities - Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians. It is against the law for religious minorities to hold senior government or military positions and all non-Shi'a are barred from being elected president.

The Situation of the Bahá'í

Members of the Bahá'í faith, which number some 300,000 in Iran, have been singled out for harsh treatment and a steady stream of anti-Bahá'í hostility plays out on television screens, magazines, and newspapers in Iran, which constantly bombard Iranian citizens with messages of anti-Bahá'í sentiment. Additionally, the Government of Iran is directly involved in the ongoing persecution of its Bahá'í population. In 2006, Asma Jahangir [JAH-hahn-gear], the U.N. Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, revealed a letter from Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei to the Command Headquarters of the Armed Forces, requesting that the Command Headquarters identify Bahá'ís and monitor their activities including business activities.

This year we confirmed that 54 young adult Bahá'í were sentenced for the crime of 'anti-regime propaganda,' with three receiving four-year prison terms. The remaining 51 Bahá'ís received suspended sentences, representing Iran's system of revolving door detentions and the use of suspended sentences as a means of intimidation. Bahá'ís also face severe restrictions in education. Authorities are currently withholding the educational records of some 800 Bahá'í students, which are necessary to complete the university admission process.

Other Religious Groups

Practitioners of Sufism also face horrific treatment as Sufi community leaders now find themselves under constant harassment and intimidation by Iran's intelligence and security services. Sunni religious groups often report abuse, including detentions and torture of Sunni clerics, as well as other widespread restrictions on their ability to practice their faith. Sunni teachings in public schools and Sunni religious literature are also banned under the regime. Sufi community leaders now find themselves under constant harassment and intimidation by Iran's intelligence and security services.

Christians in Iran, primarily ethnic Armenians, as well as Assyrians continue to be subject to close surveillance and harassment. Members of evangelical Protestant congregations are required to carry membership cards, photocopies of which must be provided to the authorities upon demand, and worshippers are often subjected to identity checks by authorities posted outside congregation centers.

Jews in Iran frequently face official discrimination. Anti-Semitic government statements, conferences, media programming, books, and other publications - blurring the lines between Judaism and Zionism - are commonplace and fosters a hostile atmosphere for Jews. Two synagogues in the country were attacked.

USG Action

In response to these abuses, The United States actively presses the Iranian regime on human rights issues, including religious freedom. Our relationship with Iran is unique in that we do not have a diplomatic presence in Iran, but we use all tools available to us to advance human rights and religious freedom in Iran.

To raise the profile of individual cases and key issues, we regularly issue statements condemning Iran's abusive behavior towards its citizens. Most recently we join the international community in calling for the release of several detained Bahá'ís. In addition, as you know, Iran is subject to a wide variety of U.S. sanctions, which under the International Religious Freedom Act, have also been linked to its disregard for religious freedom.

Our democracy programs include several grants that provide accurate information on human rights abuses, including religious freedom, to Iranians. They also disseminate information on international human rights standards, including religious freedom, inside Iran and work to support human rights activists across the board.

Multilaterally, the United States worked to ensure the passage in December of the fifth U.N. General Assembly resolution addressing Iran's dismal human rights record. We support the work of the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief. We also work closely with like-minded allies who do have Embassies in Iran to ensure they raise key religious freedom issues with the Iranians. We work particularly closely with the EU, which has made human rights, religious and minority rights in Iran an area of particular focus over the past few months.

Lastly, we believe outreach to the NGO community here in the United States is also essential. We meet regularly with key international and American NGOs, and interested Iranians and Iranian-Americans, to ensure we have the most accurate information available and discuss human rights and religious freedom on a regular basis.

As we move forward, we will continue highlight the regime's abuses and stand with the Iranian people in their quest for freedom and human dignity. Again, I offer sincere thanks to the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom for your commitment to promoting freedom of thought, conscience, and religion for every individual, in every nation and society around the world.